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ABSTRACT

Stressing the importance of choosing either a child-centered or a subject-centered orientation in developing a children's literature program, this paper discusses the characteristics of child-centered and subject-centered approaches to literature and then focuses on the dominant literary theories of structuralism and revisionism. Maintaining that structuralists would base a literature program on the subject while revisionists would emphasize both the subject and the reader's responses, the paper then discusses teaching recommendations from each theory. The document concludes with a list of appropriate illustrative questions, the answers for which would differ between structuralists and revisionists. (HTH)

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Child-Centered or Subject-Centered Children's Literature Program? Recommendations from the Two Most Recent Dominant Literary Critical Theories (Structuralism and Revisionism)

Gordon Peterson

When discussing the children's literature program it is necessary to discuss the extent to which the program should be child-centered or subject-centered. This is among the most important topics because without a response to it one cannot choose the most appropriate literary selections and determine the most appropriate teaching techniques.

The desirability of a child-centered or a subject-centered program will be discussed from the perspective of recent literary authorities who have proposed a theory of literary criticism. It is the purpose of this article to present an introductory statement by briefly giving the characteristics of a child-centered and subject-centered literature program, by giving the characteristics of the two most recent dominant literary critical theories and summarizing the basic beliefs of the leading representatives of each theory, and by suggesting recommendations from each theory.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD-CENTERED AND SUBJECT-CENTERED

For the purposes of this article, following is a listing of the

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basic characteristics of a child-centered and subject-centered children's literature program:

Subject-centered has the greatest emphasis on	Child-centered has the greatest emphasis on
1. the unique characteristics of the subject;	1. the unique characteristics of each student;
2. internal textual analysis and evaluation;	2. external analysis and evaluation;
3. teaching literature as a separate subject.	3. having literature integrated into the total school curricula.

THE BASIC IDEAS OF THE TWO MOST RECENT DOMINANT LITERARY THEORIES

During the last one to two decades the two dominant literary critical theories (dominant being defined as the view represented by the individuals who write scholarly articles and books) is what has been called structuralism and revisionism.

Structuralism

During the late 1960s literary structuralism began to receive considerable attention in America (it received attention in Europe in the early 1960s) and during the 1970s it was the dominant literary critical theory.

In general, structuralism reveals the shift in the perception of reality that was first revealed in the physical sciences and later in

social sciences and humanities. Structuralism's "new" contribution involves the realization that, despite appearances to the contrary, the world does not consist of independently existing objects whose features can be perceived clearly, but the world is made up of relationships rather than things. It has three general characteristics: 1) there is an emphasis on the whole (individual entities are perceived in relationship to the whole), 2) the essence is capable of being transformed into a wide variety of different expressions while retaining its own particular structure, and 3) it is self-regulating (there is no appeal beyond itself for validation).

Applying these three general characteristics to literature, literary structuralism has the following three basic characteristics: 1) a literary selection is viewed as a whole and the individual parts are viewed as to how they contribute toward the development of the whole, 2) there are many valid interpretations (however, all interpretations must deal with the structure and how the parts contribute to the emergence of the whole), and 3) literature exists for its own reasons and these are different from those of other subjects, such as history, politics, religion, psychology, and sociology.

Among the leading literary structuralists are Roland Barthes, Jan Mukarovsky, Stein Olsen, and V. I. Propp.

The most influential and famous literary structuralist is Roland Barthes. Three of his most important fundamental beliefs are his definition of literature, his statement of the most important literary criteria, and his distinction between validity and truth. First, Barthes believes

literature should be chiefly concerned with the language in a work and he is opposed to the reduction of literary works to environmental factors (biographical, historical, political, religious, sociological, psychological, idealogical, etc.). Second, Barthes suggests the most important literary criteria is the effectiveness of the author to raise a problem, to create suspense, and to provide a resolution. Third, regarding validity and truth, Barthes believes that literary interpretation is language about language and references are not made to the extent a work reflects the world (external reality). The purpose of literary interpretation is no to discover external "truths" but only to find internal "validities." Literary language is not to be interpreted as either true or false, but it is to be interpreted as being either valid or not valid in the sense of presenting a coherent and internally consistent system of signs (words).

The chief contribution of Jan Mukarovsky is his emphasis on foregrounding: in literature the words should attract attention to themselves rather than being a vehicle to present information.

Perhaps the best single book explaining the structuralist position is Stein Olsen's THE STRUCTURE OF LITERARY UNDERSTANDING (1978). Olsen believes literature should not aim at either evoking an emotional response or at giving information to influence beliefs, but he believes a literary selection should be evaluated by the extent all the elements are integrated into a unity.

V. I. Propp makes an important suggestion in stating a work should be approached from the perspective of the function of the characters (hero, villain, helper, and sought-for-person).

Revisionism

The main assumption underlying the literary critics who have been called revisionists (also they have been called deconstructionists, poststructuralists, and the new irrationalists) is that literary language does not reflect the author's original objective reality. (Two other often given statements reflecting this basic belief are there is a prison house of language in which the reader cannot understand that which is beyond personal experiences, and language does not reflect meaning but rather language creates its own meaning.)

Among the leading representatives are Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gerald Graff, and Paul de Man.

"Creative misreading" is a key term reflecting Harold Bloom's basic belief. By this he means a text does not have external meaning and it is the purpose of a reader to personally examine a work to correct or revise the interpretations of others.

Jacques Derrida, probably the most influential revisionist, believes the signifier (the word) and the signified (the idea) are not the same for the writer and reader. Meanings do not have independent existence, but rather meanings are those features of signs that are transferred to objects by the reader. Words must be studied not for their independent meaning but according to how they function in a specific literary work.

For Michel Foucault, who has an archeological perspective, words do not have stable characteristics like stones, but words have meanings given to them by a specific culture. A reader interprets a word not in any objective way but in a cultural way.

The basic beliefs of Gerald Graff are literature does not reflect ultimate truth but instead is about itself, and there is no certainty of knowledge (the reader probably will not and can not perceive what the author intended).

Paul de Man believes "sign and meaning can never coincide." By this he means that it is impossible for literary language to escape from confusion and untruth, it is a fallacy to believe in a finite and single interpretation, and interpretation is a task without progress and end.

TEACHING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM EACH THEORY

From the ideas of the structuralists and the revisionists, teaching recommendations can be made. First their ideas will be applied to if there should be a subject- or child-centered children's literature program, and then appropriate illustrative questions will be presented.

Should there be emphasis on the unique characteristics of the subject or student? The structuralists would base the program on the subject, but the revisionists would both emphasize the subject and a student's response to literary selections. For example, whereas the structuralists, especially Barthes and Mukarovsky, emphasize understanding literary language, the revisionists, especially Bloom and Foucault, stress the importance of individual reaction to the text. Both the structuralists and the revisionists begin with the unique subject literature, but the difference is that the structuralists stay with the text whereas the revisionists believe it is inevitable to have individual reactions to the text. The structuralists would have more objective analysis whereas

the revisionists would present a subjective interpretation.

Should there be internal or external analysis and evaluation? Both the structuralists and the revisionists would emphasize the internal, but, again, there is an important difference in that the revisionists would also consider the reader's external experiences and beliefs. The structuralists, mainly Barthes and Olsen, approach a selection in an attempt to interpret what the author has presented and not use any external consideration. On the other hand, the revisionists, particulary Graff and de Man, would start with the internal but quickly move to an interpretation based on personal experiences and beliefs; in an attempt to grasp the author's meaning, the revisionists uses reader characteristics. The external is irrelevant to the structuralist, but the external ends up as an important consideration for the revisionists.

Should literature be taught as a separate subject or integrated into other subjects. As with both of the two preceeding characteristics, the structuralists begin and end with the subject-centered program, but the revisionists begin with the subject-centered and end with the child-centered. To the structuralists, especially Olsen and Propp, literature should be taught as a separate subject , but to the revisionists, chiefly Bloom and Graff, literature would begin as a separate and unique subject but soon the content of other subjects would be involved.

Illustrative appropriate questions can be given reflecting the basic beliefs of the structuralists and the revisionists. The chief difference in using these questions is the structuralists would expect answers closely based on what the author stated whereas the revisionist would acknowledge,

and even encourage, personal responses. The revisionists would not accept any response, but they would accept responses for which adequate justification has been presented.

The following are illustrative appropriate questions:

1. Explain how the plot (theme, characterization) developed.
2. Explain the common features of all the works we have read this week.
3. Explain how this selection is similar to and different from the one we read yesterday.
4. Explain why _____ happened.
5. To what extent are all the episodes and characters necessary?
6. Evaluate how and the extent the author made this common and universal situation seem fresh.
7. Evaluate the extent the author's style drew attention to itself (provided literary satisfactions) as opposed to merely serving as a means to provide information.
8. Evaluate the believability of the plot (character) based on what the author wrote.
9. Analyze and evaluate the extent to which the author effectively raised a problem, created suspense, had movement to the climax, and provided an adequate resolution.

child or subject

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